AN ASPECT OF THE FORGER'S ART IN EARLY ISLAMIC POETRY

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A study of the poetry of the *Sīra* shows that a high proportion of it is the work of more or less professional forgers who supplied narrators with poems especially prepared to suit the narrative and appeal to the audience whose outlook towards the events of early Islam had undergone considerable change. Two or three generations after the final victory of Islam and the death of the Prophet, the persons as well as the events of that era were becoming part of past history. Past events had begun to take a different form and when viewed across the years they appeared like a panorama in which only certain high points were visible, and different landmarks were differently placed in relation to each other. Time had produced a shift of interest and a change in outlook, and certain persons were becoming more legendary and less human.

Again, the first century or so was very eventful. There were changes, political and otherwise. Sects as well as parties came into being and new interests as well as new modes of thought appeared. All these had their effect on the form which the *Sīra* finally took, and in particular on the poetry that was used to embellish it. The vast majority of the poetry that was composed at the time of the events themselves was lost during the eventful years which followed or was overwhelmed by other verse composed during those years on events which, to a large extent, involved the same tribes.

The narrative had to be supplied with poetry, not only because poetry was an effective accompaniment, but also because it was expected. The narrators had to embellish their story with suitable poems in order to emphasize important, sentimental, or dramatic moments. They had to provide elegies on the Muslim dead, suitable to the new outlook, and to arrange exchanges of poems—another instance, no doubt, of emphasizing the dramatic element. Such verse reflected not only what a later generation thought, but also their own idea of what took place earlier. Those who supplied the verse were sometimes mere versifiers with no political, sectarian, tribal, or other affiliation. In other cases they held strong views and served a clear purpose.

It can be clearly seen that a number of persons must have been responsible for what can be classed as spurious poetry, and that the quality of the verse varies. On the whole, however, the work of the forger is very inferior. Allowing for those who had particular sentiments which they wanted to express from whatever motive—and some of them display greater ability as versifiers—the forger's task was generally to produce lines of verse embodying certain material. In its simplest form, this material may be no more than part of the narrative, put into verse. This being the aim, and the audience evidently having become more receptive and less discriminating, these forgeries usually betray extreme inferiority. The rules of grammar, syntax, and idiom are often subjected to the

metre, and even proper names are altered. Padding abounds and balance and good sense are often disregarded.

The forger is also betrayed by what may be termed unconscious lapses, such as exhibiting Muslim sentiments or ideas in a crystallized or more sophisticated form such as came into being after the final victory of Islam, using Qur'anic expressions, or words which came into being in that sense in the days of the forger; referring to the Prophet in terms of unqualified reverence in poems which are presented as a polytheist attack on him; or attributing to a Himyarite king lines in the same language and style as were used for a Qurashite. Shī'ite or Hashimite sentiments are usually clear, and poems with such sentiments often direct the praise, which is generously given, to the family of the Prophet. To this category belong the comparatively large number of elegies on Hamza and Ja'far, who would be considered the first of a long list of martyrs.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the *Sīra* poetry is the number of polemical pairs of poems. A pair of these is usually presented as an attack from one side and a counterblast by a poet from the other camp. Ibn Hishām's authorities [1] expressed doubt about the authenticity of many of them, though that does not mean that they accepted the rest. Of four such poems on the battle of Badr, for example, these authorities expressly rejected two, but in a remark [2] in the introduction to one poem on Badr, doubt was generally cast on all others.

Although these poems are the work of more than one person, a large number of them show clear marks of one hand; one poet is usually responsible for the pair. Allowing for differences in 'craftsmanship', and the ability of the poet responsible, more often than not these poems show definite characteristics. They are generally comparatively long, and a pair are usually exactly or very nearly equal in length. They 'drag' and narrate events or list names as though from a book. Throughout they are cold, and lack feeling. Often they betray their real nature in the manner already referred to. More often than not the pair follow the same distinct pattern and the lines of one correspond to the other with mathematical precision—clearly the plan of the forger. Often the poems show a religious devotion of a more sophisticated kind than one expects from the followers of the Prophet in the early stages of Islam. They often show sentimentality, and above all they often contain a number of hackneyed phrases which act as unmistakable signs, especially in the opening lines.

It would be of interest to examine one such pair of polemical poems [3] which is in many ways typical, and which at the same time exhibits clearly many of the characteristics of forged poetry. The occasion is the siege of Medina, and one poem is attributed to Ibn al-Ziba'rā, the Meccan polytheist poet, while the

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[1] See the article ' Early critics of the authenticity of the poetry of the *Sīra* ', by the present writer, *BSOAS*, XXI, 3, 1958, 453–63.

[2] *Sīra* (ed. Wüstenfeld), 534.

[3] Both poems are in *Sīra*, 702–3. See also *Dīwān* of Ḥassān b. Thābit (ed. Hirschfeld) no. XIV, and (ed. Barqūqī, Cairo, 1929) p. 11.

other is ascribed to Ḥassān b. Thābit. Few pairs of poems show more clearly the unmistakable signs of one author.

I (Ibn al-Zibaʿrā)

حيّ الديار محا معارفَ رسمهـــا   طول البلى وتراوح الأحقاب

فكأنّما كتب اليهود رسومها   إلا الكنيف ومعقد الأطناب

قفراً كــأنك لم تكن تلهو بهـا   في نعمة بـأوانس أتراب

فاترك تذكرَ ما مضى من عيشة   ومحلة خلق المقام يـباب

واذكر بلاء معاشر وآشكـرهم   ساروا بأجمعهم من الأنصاب

أنصاب مكة عـامدين ليثرب   في ذي غياطل جحفل ججاب

يدع الحزون مناهجاً معلـومة   في كل نشز ظاهر وشعاب

فيه الجياد شوازب مجنوبـة   قب البطون لواحق الأقـراب

من كل سلهبة وأجردَ سلهب   كالسيـد بادر غفلـة الرقـاب

جيش عيينة قاصد بلوائـه   فيـه وضر قائـد الاحـزاب

قرمان كالبدرين أصبح فيهـا   غيث الفقير ومعقـل الهـرّاب

حتى إذا وردوا المدينـة وآرتـدوا   للموت كـل مجردٍ قضـاب

شهـراً وعشراً قاهرين محمداً   وصحابهُ في الحرب خير صحـاب

نادوا برحلتهـم صبيحة قلتُم   كدنا نكون بهـا مع الحيّـاب

لولا الخنادق غادروا من جمعهـم   قتلى لطير سغَب وذيـاب

II (Ḥassān b. Thābit) [4]

هل رسم دارسة المقـام يباب   متكـلم لمحـــاور بجـواب

قفر عفارهـم السحاب رسومَه   وهبوب كل مطلـة مرباب

ولقد رأيت بها الحلول يزينهـم   بيض الوجوه ثواقب الأحساب

فدع الديار وذكر كل خريدة   بيضاء آنسة الحديث كعـاب

وآشك الهموم الى الإله وما ترى   من معشر ظلموا الرسولَ غضاب

ساروا بأجمعهم إليـه وألبـــوا   أهـل القرى وبواديَ الأعراب

جيش عيينة وابن حرب فيهم   متخمطون بحلبـة الأحزاب

حتى إذا وردوا المدينـة وآرتجـوا   قتل الرسول ومغنمَ الأسـلاب

وغدوا علينـا قادرين بأيـدهم   رُدّوا بغيظهم على الأعقـاب

بجيوب معصفة تفرق جمعهـم   وجنود ربّك سيـد الأرباب

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[4] The *Sīra* version is given here. Line 2 does not occur in the *Dīwān* of Ḥassān b. Thābit. Other differences between the version of the *Sīra* and that of the *Dīwān* are few and do not affect the argument.

وأثابهم في الأجرِ خيرَ ثوابِ   فكفى الإلــه المؤمنــين قتــالهم

تنزيلُ نصر مليكنــا الوهّــابِ   من بعـد ما قنطوا ففرق جمعهم

وأذلَّ كــلَّ مكـذّبٍ مُرتابِ   وأقر عــين محمـدٍ وصحــابهِ

فى الكفر ليس بطــاهرِ الأثوابِ   عانى الفؤاد موقّع ذى ريبـةٍ

فى الكفر آخر هذه الاحقابِ   على الشقـاءِ بقلبـه ففـؤاده

In form the two poems correspond to a remarkable degree of exactitude. The version of Ḥassān's poem found in the *Dīwāns* is 14 lines, but Ibn Isḥāq's version is 15, thus making it exactly the same number of lines as its opposite. The extra line [5] begins with the same word as that corresponding to it in the other poem, and treats of the same point.

Ibn al-Zibaʻrā's poem begins traditionally with the mention of the traces (ll. 1–3). In l. 4 the poet exhorts himself to abandon these memories and to relate the achievements of and to praise the army that marched ' from the idols ' (l. 5), ' the idols of Mecca ', making for Yathrib (l. 6). The army is then described in traditional terms (ll. 7–9) and the leaders ʻUyaina and Abū Sufyān, here called by his first name, Sakhr, which is better suited to the metre, are mentioned and praised (ll. 10–11). The result of the campaign is stated in ll. 12–15. Having come to Medina and stayed ' a month and ten days ' attempting to overwhelm Muḥammad, they announced their intention to depart on the day the Muslims were almost certain of defeat ; or as the poet puts it ' on the morning when you (the Muslims) said " we almost joined the frustrated " '. Had it not been for the trenches they would have left many dead (l. 15).

The poem attributed to Ḥassān b. Thābit opens similarly with memories provoked by the traces, which end with the same exhortation to abandon the subject of the deserted encampment (l. 4) and to complain of his cares unto God (l. 5).

In this part, the parallelism between both poems is clear and precise. In each poem the imperative is used for ' abandon this (subject) ' as well as the exhortation to start another theme. In the first poem the poet is exhorted to ' relate and praise the achievement ' of a certain host ' who marched together from the idols ' : in the second poem he is exhorted to ' complain unto God of cares ' and ' of what he sees of a host gathered together in anger ', to give a literal translation. Some of the words used are the same as in poem I.

The description of the army follows in l. 10 and l. 7. The latter is of special interest because it has an exact parallel in the other poem. Line 10 in the poem attributed to Ibn al-Zibaʻrā is

فيــه وصخـرٌ قــائد الأحزابِ   جيشٌ عُيينــةُ قاصدٌ بلــوائه

and l. 7 in the poem ascribed to Ḥassān

متخمطــون بحلبـةِ الأحزابِ   جيشٌ عُيينةُ وآبن حربٍ فيهم

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[5] Line 2 corresponds to l. 3 in Ibn al-Zibaʻrā's poem.

These minor changes were dictated by the metre as a result of the slight varia-
tion which the poet introduced.

Lines 8–12 tell of the result of the campaign. ' And when they came to
Medina and hoped to kill the Prophet and win the spoils, and were in a position
to overpower us by virtue of their force, they were repulsed (l. 9) by the tempest
which blew and scattered them, and by the help of " the soldiers of thy Lord,
the Lord of all lords " (l. 10). Thus God saved the Believers the need to fight
them and rewarded them well (l. 11). After they were nearly driven to despair,
the gathered host of (their enemies) were scattered by the help which God sent
down (l. 12) '.

Here one can see clearly the exact correspondence between this and the
parallel section in the other poem (ll. 12 ff.) which also deals with what
happened. Line 12 of Ibn al-Ziba'rā's poem and l. 8 of the other correspond so
exactly that in the first hemistich of both of them only one word is different,
or to be exact, only a single letter of that word. The two lines are :

poem I, l. 12

للمـوت كـــل مجرَّب قَضّاب   حتى إذا ورَدوا ٱلمدينة وٱرتَدَوْا

poem II, l. 8

قتـــل الرسول ومغنم الأسلابِ   حتى إذا ورَدوا ٱلمدينة وٱرتَجَوْا

Another parallel is found in the idea of victory coming after despair in the
lines already summarized (ll. 8 and 11), and in poem I, ll. 12 and 14. Similarly in
the allegedly ' Islamic' poem, victory is expressly attributed to divine aid, while
in the poem attributed to Ibn al-Ziba'rā, a point is made of the trenches as the
means that saved Medina.

Again it is clear that ' Muḥammad and his companions ', in l. 13 of poem I
is re-echoed in l. 13 of the other poem.

The last lines of the poem ascribed to Ḥassān express the effect of the
victory on the Muslims—how it pleased Muḥammad and his companions and
humiliated the unbelievers, who are described in uncomplimentary terms in the
last two lines of the poem. This description of them is no doubt the counterpart
of the complimentary description of the attacking host in ll. 8–10 of the poem
attributed to Ibn al-Ziba'rā.

It is possible to summarize the parallels between the two poems as follows :

Poem I attributed to Ibn al-Ziba'rā		Poem II attributed to Ḥassān
ll. 1–6	correspond to	1–6
l. 10	corresponds to	7
ll. 12–15	correspond to	8–12
ll. 7–9, 11	correspond to	13–15

The real importance of these parallelisms is that they are not in any way
arguments advanced by one and refuted by the other. They are merely the
same material available to one person who is trying to present it from both

points of view. There is varied evidence of lack of subtlety in the whole opera-
tion. It is remarkable that there is no indication whatever that either of these
two poems which are supposed to be a boast and a reply to it presumed the
pre-existence of the other. It is perfectly clear that one man at one ' sitting '
composed both poems.

Yet more and varied evidence can be found to reveal the forgery. Of the
poem attributed to Ibn al-Ziba'rā there is no need to point out more than
the fact that the poet betrays himself by the use of the word ' al-Aḥzāb ' for the
attacking army, a name which a member of the opposite camp would not be
flattered to use, and which most probably became generally used later : and
by the use of the word ' al-Madīna ', also an Islamic name [6] which must have
taken time to become current, and which it is doubtful whether even a Muslim
poet of that date would use in the same matter-of-course manner. In a previous
line he had referred to it as Yathrib. Lastly, the forger is betrayed by the
complimentary terms in which he mentions Muḥammad and his companions—
' the best companions ' (l. 13).

In the case of both poems it is clear that there is a lapse of time which
separates the poet from the events described. The poet simply has certain
material which he is working into shape, and it is obvious that he is a Muslim.
There is not the feeling which springs from personal connexion with the event.
For the most part this is clear in the poet's use of the third person, but even
when the first person is used, in ll. 9 and 12 of the poem attributed to Ḥassān,
it does not have the ring of truth. It is just one more case of the narrator's
material put into verse.

Looking closely at the poem attributed to Ḥassān, one could reiterate the
remarks already made on the use of the words ' Aḥzāb ' and ' Madīna '. Next
one notices that all the credit is given to the tempest and the angels, an attitude
which is hardly possible, especially when the disappointed host were tribes from
Ma'add who were attempting to conquer a Yamanite city. It is difficult to
believe that even the most devout Muslim of that time would completely forgo
his share of the credit and let pass an opportunity for boasting and taunting the
Qurashites.   Nor indeed was it considered irreligious to boast of services
rendered to the Faith or of great deeds done in its cause.

On the whole the diction of the poems is commonplace and the structure
weak, the lines have no power and are full of padding. The weakness of the
structure of the poems is well matched to the weak spirit it reflects. Weakness,
artificiality, or padding, or all three are clear in every line. Further illustrations
can be quoted from both poems, but perhaps enough has been said to show that
neither Ibn al-Ziba'rā nor Ḥassān b. Thābit was responsible for either poem, and
that one forger composed them in a later age, and in one effort.

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[6] One need not doubt that Yathrib was referred to as Madīna in the same way Mecca was
balad or *al-balad*, but it is only after the coming of Islam that al-Madīna as a name ousted Yathrib.